ALERT

News from the UFMCC
on AIDS Legislation, Education, Research and Treatment.

October 1992

Napa Valley, CA: A Tiny MCC With A Big AIDS Ministry

The Northwest District has made MCC in the Vineyards in Napa, CA a special work of the District, recognizing that this particular MCC, although small in numbers, has an extraordinary ministry to people with HIV/AIDS in the Napa Valley. The pastor, Rev. Jack Isbell, proudly states, "Ours is a ministry of presence. We are not a big, loud thing, but we are a cup of cold water given in Christ's name."

Rev. Isbell and his spouse, Nick Eyre, moved to Napa, CA in September, 1986 so that Jack could take a job at Napa State Hospital. There was a small MCC in Napa, but less than a month after Nick and Jack's arrival, the pastor, Rev. Dan Geslin, left the area to take care of his ailing mother. According to Rev. Isbell, "I inherited everything. Nick and I had been active in AIDS work, and so we started asking around about AIDS activities. There was an organizational meeting, which included a Presbyterian pastor who had been very active in the Civil Rights movement in Indiana, a Roman Catholic lay woman who was a social worker, and a Catholic chaplain at the Queen of the Valley Hospital. By October, we were calling our organization the 'Napa Valley AIDS Project (NVAP)'". The Project started with only a phone number, which was forwarded around to their homes. Soon the group got pamphlets and educational materials and started doing education and some direct services.

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Rev. Jack Isbell and his spouse Nick Eyre, in Gay Pride Parade

New Zealand: Doing The Condom Run

By Rev. Elder Willem Hein

New Zealand is a land of many contrasts. Beautiful mountains contrast with desert areas, the Maori culture contrasts with the Pakeha (white) culture. It all comes together in an ever-changing tapestry of life, and provides for a country that is beautiful, rich in heritage and challenging as cultures and backgrounds intermingle. But one thing that is the same in New Zealand as in many other parts of the world is that AIDS has been an integral part of the community since the early 1980's. Officialdom took a while to get going and then funded the New Zealand AIDS Foundation in the fragmentary way that we know government bureaucracy works. It all looks high profile, and, like in any other country, those in the limelight are quick to take the accolades and blame others for the failures.

But there is another side to the struggle - a quieter side that few of the recipients see and probably will not be able to thank those who work in it. David holds a high profile position in MCC and is a foundation member of that city's AIDS organization. But there is another part to David's work that has little thanks attached, and that is doing the condom run. Unlike some countries, condoms are not freely available. Individuals can purchase them over the counter or obtain them on prescription which, of course, costs a visit to a doctor.

Through a complicated series of procedures, David has been able to obtain condoms legally, and thus supply the clubs and other places where people are easily at risk. It's a thankless task, however, and there is certainly no brass band when you arrive with the condoms. Club and bar owners are thankful, but it means that when holidays arrive, complex arrangements must be made, both to obtain the condoms and to ensure distribution. In addition, there are still those who think it is not necessary because "I'm careful; I won't get

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Living With HIV: An Experiment in Courage

By Mary Elizabeth O'Brien, Ph.D., R.N., F.A.A.N.
(New York: Auburn House, 1992)
BOOK REVIEW by Rev. Steve Pieters

This new book is, in part, a moving tribute to the persons with HIV/AIDS and the AIDS Ministry of MCC Washington, D.C. The author writes in the preface, "Very special thanks go to the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) whose congregation and pastoral care staff [in Washington, D.C.] facilitated the research spiritually as well as through participation." (p.xviii) She goes on to specifically thank Rev. Elder Troy Perry, Founder and Moderator of UFMCC, Rev. Larry Uhrig, pastor of MCC-D.C., Rev. Candace Shultis, associate pastor, and the senior MCC deacons, Leon Hampton, and Robert Smith. Many of the study participants were MCC members, and all of these people obviously had a profound effect on O'Brien in doing the study and writing the book.

According to O'Brien, *Living With HIV: An Experiment in Courage* is based on data generated during the first two years of a three-year research effort, the purpose of which is to identify significant physical and psychosocial problems and needs associated with human immunodeficiency virus infection. From these data appropriate caregiving strategies can be derived...The ultimate purpose of the study was to identify patterns of coping behavior for persons living with HIV over time." (pp.xvii-xviii)

The author uses sophisticated academic language throughout the book. Some readers may find the discussions of research techniques and the science of the physical and psychosocial dynamics difficult to get through; but O'Brien repeatedly lets people with HIV/AIDS and their caregivers speak for themselves. For me, this was the strongest aspect of the book: the author has illuminated each of the many issues she covers through the liberal use of these quotes. I found myself frequently welling up with tears, from recognizing the feelings, as well as from the sheer poignancy of the stories.

O'Brien does well in maintaining a hopeful yet realistic attitude throughout her thorough study. In the closing paragraph of the book, she writes, "Throughout this work, an attempt has been made to allow the reader to 'walk,' if only briefly, in the world of HIV infection; to understand, to some small degree, what is meant by the study participants' choosing to live with HIV; to indeed participate in an 'experiment in courage'." The attempt is highly successful and it is gratifying to see MCC Washington, D.C. play such an important role in this eloquent work. ▼

Napa Valley, CA *(cont'd from page 1)*

The six or seven members of MCC were interested in doing aids work, and so Jack and Nick started a 12-week training session, going over everything they could think of to prepare people for ministering to persons with AIDS. Over three years, they have done the training three times. MCC members became the core group of volunteers for the Project, which now has over 50 volunteers.

The second year, they applied for a state grant, which enabled them to hire their Executive Director, Carol Pile. Even though NVAP was now administering $20,000 in AIDS education, the Project was still essentially in the trunk of Jack's car. "The biggest problem we faced then was the lack of social support for our clients. So we were doing 24-hour duty on call. The Queen of the Valley Hospital was really good to us. One fellow who was a chain smoker was going in and out of a coma at home, and we were afraid that he would burn himself to death. So we moved him to the hospice unit at Queen of the Valley for the last three days of his life. We became very clever and creative at doing social services."

The tiny budget was not sufficient to do everything they needed to do. So they started applying for other grants, and since hiring Barbara Corotto as executive director in July, 1991, the Project has blossomed. Now they offer a three-pronged program: 1) education, 2) direct services, and 3) case management.

Education efforts include maintaining a presence in two notorious "t-rooms" handing out condoms, doing presentations in the local schools, a monthly newsletter which has a circulation of 2,000, and a teen drama group, "SAFE" (Stop AIDS First through Education), who write their own plays for the unified school district. Rev. Isbell remembers one notable education effort, when an employee of a local gas station was diagnosed with HIV, and Jack was called in to educate the other employees. "You have to understand the redneck nature of the valley. But they responded very positively at the filling station!"

According to Rev. Isbel, "Fundraising has been really successful. One clever gay man has organized an Academy Awards Night, which this year raised over $20,000 for NVAP. The event is held at a big hotel, and features closed circuit TV, a silent auction, an actor/actress lookalike contest, and wagering on the outcome of the Awards. Local wineries donate wine, and restaurants donate food. People are more than willing to pay $20 for this kind of party!"

Funds are also obtained through a $50,000 United Way grant, a $40,000 state grant for education, and the annual AIDS Walk, held in coalition with other AIDS organizations in the Bay Area.

Rev. Isbell speaks about his church's ministry of presence with gratitude: "In working with persons with full-blown AIDS, we get more than they ever give us. We try to be with them when they die, and we definitely see God there. I remember one guy who always had a self-defeated attitude. In the last two hours of his life, he kept waking up, and with a smile on his face, he asked, 'Am I doing it right?' There was a lot of peace in the end."

Jack continues: "Our theology has gotten richer at MCC in the Vineyards. I see a lot of unity in our diversity. We keep drawing the circle ever wider and wider. The church is different kinds of people, and like Rev. Russell-Coons used to say, 'The Church has AIDS' and we've got to deal with it!

Rev. Isbell and Nick Eyre have taken a tiny MCC in a rural, "redneck" area, and have spun off a thriving AIDS service agency with a budget of over $100,000. And the Northwest District has supported the people of MCC in the Vineyards in making this special work a "ministry of presence" to people with HIV/AIDS and a "church of action" for all people. ▼

Alison Arngrim Raises Thousands for AIDS House in Minnesota

Alison Arngrim, who played Nellie Oleson on TV's long-running series, "Little House on the Prairie," continues to travel around the UFMCC, teaching and preaching at AIDS Vigils, and raising money for local AIDS projects.

In August, Alison visited All God's Children MCC in Minneapolis, MN, where she raised over $7,000 for Agape House. Agape House is a non-profit corporation developed by members of All God's Children MCC, to establish a new adult foster care facility to care for persons with AIDS. On her first day there, she did a TV interview on a local midday news show, a radio interview, and a press conference at the church before presenting her "Healing through Laughter" comedy routine at a concert featuring the Twin City Gay Men's Chorus, the Brass Ensemble from the Minnesota Freedom Band, and several soloists.

Saturday, a caravan of MCC people took Alison on a tour of six of the towns where "Little House" actually took place, including Mankato, Sleepy Eye, and Walnut Grove, where most of the series was set. In each town, hundreds of people showed up (sometimes the crowd actually exceeded the population of the town), and Alison gave a speech and held a question and answer session.

In her speeches, she educated people from these rural Minnesota towns about HIV/AIDS, MCC, the lesbian/gay community, and the Agape House. As a way of raising money for Agape House, she sold autographed pictures for $3.00. These were so popular, that they ran out of pictures by the time they arrived in Walnut Grove, their final stop, and the home of the original Ingalls and Oleson families.

In Walnut Grove, the town held a "Welcome Home, Nellie!" picnic supper, as well as a program featuring characters from "Little House." She had her picture taken standing and sitting in the real Plum Creek, which was frequently used on the series as the site of fights between Laura and Nellie.

Vikki McMullen, chairperson for Agape House, and a deacon at All God's Children MCC, said, "She was a delight. Everybody just loved her! I was in awe all weekend. She reached people we may not be able to. The 'Nellie' thing drew people there, but their attitude changed immediately. She had such a high level of energy and was so focused. She knew just what she wanted to do, and never lost sight of that."

Some people from Walnut Grove were so moved by Alison's message, that they drove the two hours into Minneapolis to hear her preach Sunday morning at All God's Children MCC. Deacon Vikki says that her entire visit was "great for public relations, and community building in the church."

In September, Alison journeyed to Harvest MCC in Denton, TX for their AIDS Vigil. In addition to preaching to a standing-room only crowd at their Sunday morning service, she did a workshop on Pediatric AIDS (Alison's specialty), one on Safe Sex, and her "Healing through Laughter" workshop. Rev. Ed Paul, Associate Pastor at Harvest MCC, adds, "We took her to visit a residence for Persons with AIDS in Dallas, to Brian's House, a place for children with HIV, and to Texas Woman's University. Everywhere we went, it was amazing to see the amount of excitement she caused!

"We've sent out numerous press releases in the past, but we've never had any coverage. With Alison here, two different Dallas newspapers, and both the university papers in Denton had articles on her, our church, and the AIDS Vigil. It's the

Alison wades in Plum Creek - site of fights with Laura

first time we've ever had any attention from the media! At our Sunday service, we had the largest attendance we've had in a long time! You had to use a shoe spoon to get another person in our church! We just totally loved having her here!"

Rev. Paul advises, "Be smart! Invite Alison to your church. She will deliver excitement, fun, and love. Everybody wants to meet Nellie Oleson from 'Little House on the Prairie.' We found doors previously closed to our church were opened by Alison being with us. People saw the articles in all the papers, and called the office for more information about our church. Her workshops are enthusiastic, informative, and fun. Nellie Oleson opens the door and Alison Arngrim goes to work!"

Before the end of 1992, Alison is scheduled to visit MCC's in St. Louis, Las Vegas, Orlando, Houston, and Lancaster.

If you would like to invite Alison Arngrim to bring her dynamic message to your church or organization in 1993, she can be reached at (213) 467-9901. ▼

Alison visits Walnut Grove, MN; home of 'Little House'

New Zealand:... *(cont'd from page 1)*

AIDS," or, for the younger crowd, "AIDS only happens to older people." One of David's frustrations in his counseling work is that there is still an "It won't happen to me" mentality.

I sat at home with David one night on a recent visit to New Zealand. It was 11 pm and bitterly cold in mid-winter. Rain poured down and sitting around a warm fire was very cozy when the call came. The owner of a bathhouse had "forgotten" and had run out of condoms. Could David help immediately? I sat and watched this man not even have second considerations. All he said was, "It's Friday. It's their busiest night. I'll be back soon." For someone who had to be up for work at 5 am, the sacrifice was not too much.

Later we talked about what it meant to him. All he said was, "I've seen too many friends die. I'm still seeing young ones come down with HIV. Even one condom is worth it." For this man of respectability, condoms save lives. Living on the sometime edge of government legality, not quite breaking the law, it's worth doing the condom run. ▼

Pastoring With AIDS

By Rev. David Presley

For nearly three years after my AIDS diagnosis, I had the opportunity to pastor a medium-size church in North Texas. It was a wonderful and rich experience for me and the congregation. I am confident that had the community been able to offer the appropriate medical support, I would still be working in that pastorate.

However, I have learned certain things about being a pastor in such a unique situation. These are very practical and, I hope, helpful to other pastors and congregations finding themselves in the same situation.

1) Strong Congregational Support

For any pastor to have an effective ministry, it is vital that there exists a strong element of support from the congregation. This is even more true of a congregation with a pastor who is a person with AIDS. This support often must come in the form of loving patience. When the pastor is sick or suffering fatigue, the love or belief in him/her should not diminish. On the contrary, this is the time that congregational support is most important.

2) Able Alternative Leadership

When a church considers calling an HIV-impacted pastor, it should evaluate the local church leadership as well as the clergyperson. There needs to exist sufficient and skilled leadership to step in and implement the back-up plan as discussed below. This can be a wonderful time of learning and growth for some, but the church will need others who are experienced in those elements of the back-up plan.

3) Back-Up Plan

One of the most fundamental elements needed when a pastor is living with AIDS is for him/her to always have a back-up plan for the many responsibilities. This includes primary worship services, but must go beyond this. A pastor is more than a "sermon-giver." Other responsibilities should be covered (in-progress counseling, funerals, hospital visits, continuing the church programs, etc.) A good pastor is one who has prepared the congregation for any event related to AIDS.

4) Being a Pastor With AIDS is a Plus to Pastor and Congregation

When I was initially diagnosed in 1988, I thought that my pastorate was over. Through the caring support of the congregation, I became convinced this did not have to be so. We began to view the AIDS diagnosis as a positive factor. My preaching/teaching became fuller, and the bond between pastor and people has strengthened a great deal. We "can do everything through Christ who gives us strength." (Philippians 4:13 NIV)

5) Learn To Be A Pastor To One Another

The scriptures give the children of God a promise that "God works for the good of those that love God." (Romans 8:28 NIV) Therefore, I expected good to come out of my AIDS diagnosis, and I watched for it. Actually, many good things have filled my life and ministry since my diagnosis. One of the most exciting has been watching our congregation love and, at times, "be a pastor" (or shepherd) for one another. When the pastor is ill, it can be a most difficult time; thus, it is vitally important for the affected congregation to give loving care and affirmation to one another.

It is my conviction that a rich and wonderful pastorate can be experienced by a clergyperson with HIV/AIDS. I encourage our churches to leave themselves open to this possibility. Be sure to enter such a relationship with "eyes open." Love your pastor (HIV or non-HIV) and trust God to give you the sufficiency to be the church you are called to be. ▼

"Going Home"
Canadian HIV/AIDS Film

"Going Home," the AIDS film based on the story of the Prodigal Son, is now available for only $29.95 (Canadian $) to MCC congregations. An article about the film appeared in the August, 1992 ALERT. Produced by Clarence Crossman from an idea by Rev. Joseph Totten-Reid, the film is available with an excellent discussion manual for $69.95; but $29.95 will purchase the film with an accompanying information packet.

To order this very exciting video resource, send a check or money order to the AIDS Committee of London, 343 Richmond Street, Suite 200, London, Ontario, Canada, N6C 3C2, or call (519) 434-1601 for further information. ▼

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